

**A close reading of Anne Michaels**

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**Dissertação de Mestrado em Narrativas Culturais: Convergências e  
Aberturas.**

**Junho 2018**



## Crossways in Cultural Narratives

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Title: A close reading of Anne Michaels

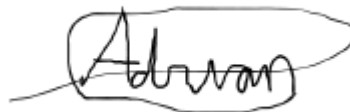
Date: June 2018, Lisbon

### Abstract

This essay looks at the poetry book *The Weight of Oranges* of Anne Michaels, one of most relevant figures of actual Canadian literature. This research develops a close reading of two poems (“Memoriam” and “Words for the Body”) of *The Weight of Oranges*, which is her first book. The essay is especially focused in the form, the techniques used in the poems and the structure of her poetry.

I, Adrián Pérez Fernández hereby certify that this dissertation, which is 21.713 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. All sentences or passages quoted in this dissertation from other people's work (with or without trivial changes) have been placed within quotation marks, and specifically acknowledged by reference to author, work and page. I understand that plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of such passages – will be considered grounds for failure in this dissertation and, if serious, in the degree programme as a whole. I also affirm that, with the exception of the specific acknowledgements, these answers are entirely my own work."

Signature of candidate.....

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adrian', enclosed within a large, loopy oval stroke.

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## Introduction

Anne Michaels is one of the most relevant authors of contemporary Canadian literature. Her novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1991), along with *The English Patient* (1992), written by Michael Ondaatje, was one of the most important and influential Canadian pieces of literature in the 90s. She has received the most important book awards in Canada and at the international level. Some of the awards that she won are the Orange Prize, the Guardian Fiction Prize and Canadian Authors' Association Award for her first poetry book. She also was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, the Griffin Poetry Prize. Anne Michaels was chosen, and still has the position as poet laureate of Toronto.

The scholarship on Anne Michaels generally focuses on her narratives, *The Winter Vault* (2006) and *Fugitive Pieces* (1991), normally with a greater focus on the second. This scholarship presents her as a lyrical novelist. For the public, the first contact with the author was, and normally still is, her best seller *Fugitive Pieces*. This book is also the most analyzed by academic scholarship and its influence has caused an important gap in the academic scholarship about her. For example, it is very difficult to find any kind of interview or article where she talks exclusively about her poetry. Even taking into account that she is described as a lyrical novelist, the relation of her poetry to her narrative, leaving aside general questions or comments about the beauty of the language that she uses, is nonexistent in the academic research about her.

One of the aims of this thesis is to try to change the scope of criticism about her works. One may argue that, if the author is a lyrical novelist or a poet who gradually moved to the narrative genre, her poems must have some importance, even if they only are preparations to the later narrative, which, in my opinion, is not the case. The key mistake that this kind of interpretation commits is to see as something inseparable the literary project of an author, and the presumed most important work of the author. This argument strips the books of poetry written by Anne Michaels of their autonomy. Instead of seeing the connections, and the conflicts, between the different moments of her evolution as something fragile, difficult to construct and, in many cases, not clear and going in a unique direction, it places all the evidence available on a single book, leaving aside what does not fit in its scheme. Moreover, this interpretation fails to understand the creative process of the author and her evolution, and

commits the mistake of reading the author backwards instead of following her evolution.

The argument that reads Anne Michaels' work, giving all the importance to her novels, can be summarized like this: 1) *Fugitive Pieces* seems to be, or directly is, her most important work; 2) There is a thematic connection between Anne Michaels' books of poetry written before, during and after the publication of *Fugitive Pieces*; 3) In conclusion, *Fugitive Pieces* is, in some sense, the culmination of the materials which appear in her poetry.

The general aims of this dissertation are three. First, to show, by a close reading of her poems, how in the poetry of Anne Michaels, specifically *The Weight of Oranges* (1986) there is a particular understanding of what writing is and the function of the writer. Secondly, to value her early poetry as a remarkable and interesting literary production separated from the novels. Finally, the dissertation will focus particularly in the idea of memory as an organizing principle of the author in her earliest work. Memory is a key concept to understand the themes she writes about, and how she understands what it means to write. A complete analysis of all the aspects of the author is impossible in the length available and, for this reason, a key idea is needed. The idea must be a core part of the interests and themes of the author, which makes possible to anchor the arguments and give focus to the thesis. This does not mean that the thoughts and words about memory are the most important part of her work, or that memory is the center of her literary production. Memory is the entrance, the point of access to her works. Love, language and history are concepts as important for the author as memory.

## Thesis

The two thesis of the research are: 1) that a close reading is a useful tool for the analysis of her poetry; 2) that memory is a key concept for the two poems analyzed 3) that in her poetry there is a clear connection between the ideas of form and memory.

The explanation of the poetry of the author will be organized in four points of view, which are entangled between them: an analysis of content, of form, an analysis of the interaction between form and content, and an analysis of the function of writing. A poem is a coherent unity of a form, a series of literary devices; and content, a chain of ideas. A complete analysis of a poem must deal with both components and the results of their interaction. To focus only on one element of the poem is useful to prove particular points, but inefficient to understand the poem in itself, as a complete piece of literature. Because the interest lays in a particular idea of the author, memory, a focus in specific aspects of the poems is necessary. However, this concrete focus is not contradictory with the approach of the previous paragraph. Probably, one of most useful ways to measure the weight of an idea in a poem is precisely to understand the whole poem and, afterwards, to be able to grasp how the idea relates organically to the other components of the poem.

## Methodology

The reasons to choose close reading as the methodology are the following:

- 1) In Anne Michaels' poetry, there is an intimate connection between how the author expresses an idea and the meaning of the idea.
- 2) A purely conceptual analysis of her poetry would leave aside important aspects of her evolution as an author and create an artificial separation between her view of the world and her writing style.
- 3) Finally, there is a surprising lack of analysis of the actual literary techniques the author uses. Without a close analysis of her productions, conceptual comparisons are going to be general and probably empty of meaning.

Some of the authors, books, and articles indispensable to be aware of the sources of the methodological approach belong to the school known as New Criticism. The reasons to choose New Criticism as the main theory for this thesis are the following:

- 1) It is a school particularly concerned with the connection between form, content and meaning,
- 2) The methodology they applied, and helped to develop, is close reading.
- 3) Although they focus on a conceptual approach to the analysis of poetry they try to ground it always in reference to form.
- 4) Their main interest is to explain the work of literature in itself and not to analyze it as an ideological object.

However, New Criticism is not a uniform school of literary criticism, as Cleanth Brooks, one of its main figures, argues:

I have been asked by the editor to write on the New Critics, but to engage to do such an essay is very much like embarking on the hunting of the Snark. The New Critic, like the Snark, is a very elusive beast. Everybody talks about him: there is now rather general agreement as to his bestial poetical subject; but few could give an accurate anatomical description of him. Even when one believes that the Snark has actually been netted, he usually turns out to be not a Snark at all but a Boojum (Brooks, 1979, 592).



The differences between the New Critics and the evolution of their thought in time are important and need to be taken into account to have a balanced view of this theory. Moreover, there is not a clear opinion about who exactly are the New Critics. Very relevant figures of modern literary criticism, such as T. S. Eliot or William Empson are considered as part of the school or, at least, seminal or influential authors for the New Critics. In contrast with these differences, we also have remarkable similarities. One of these similarities can be found in a critic by William Empson, probably the most independent critics of the school, of Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*:

I have been reading Mr. Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* with enjoyment and admiration, and want to write down the points at which I disagree with it. The minds of critics often work in this disagreeable way, and I hope I am right in taking for granted that the book as a whole does not need summarizing or defense. Indeed I agree so fully with his general position that if I were attacking him I should be attacking myself (Empson, 1947, 691)

The main point Empson talks about is precisely the agreement about the importance of the text and, what we could refer as intrinsic criticism. Following Rene Wellek's *The New Criticism: Pro and Contra* (1978), it seems plausible to defend that the importance given by all the New Critics to intrinsic criticism is sufficient to understand them as a single school. To examine the disagreements between these different critics could be an interesting task, but is not the main aim of this thesis.

For the aim of this section, it seems more useful to mention only the books and articles, under the label of New Criticism, which are especially relevant for this thesis. In the first place, as examples of both theoretical framework and a practical example of close reading, the works of Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), and *Seven Kinds of Ambiguity* (1930) by William Empson and Allen Tate's *Collected Essays* (1959) must be mentioned. *Understanding poetry*, written by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, was also an important book for this thesis as well as the collections of essays by T.S. Eliot *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). Important articles or sections of books which were also influential for this thesis are the following: "The Affective Fallacy" and "The Intentional Fallacy", both chapters of *The Verbal Icon* (1954), written by W.K Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley, respectively. Finally, I would like to indicate two more articles,

which were very clarifying: “Formal Critics” (1951) written, again, by Cleanth Brooks and “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer” (1940) by Allen Tate. These two articles are very good summaries of the main principles of the school and, especially, a clear justification of the rejection of the biographical explanation as the main source of knowledge to understand a text.

Some general principles of New Criticism, which can give a good idea of the perspective underlining the present analysis, can be found in Cleanth Brooks’ essay “The formalist critics”. This thesis does not defend exactly the same ideas Cleanth Brooks expressed in this text but they are still useful, and similar enough to the principles, which direct the close reading, and thus make them valuable to clarify some points of the methodology:

- 1) That literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object.
- 2) That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity- the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.
- 3) That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.
- 4) That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated.
- 5) That form is meaning.
- 6) That literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic.
- 7) That the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular.
- 8) That literature is not a surrogate for religion.
- 9) That, as Allen Tate says, "specific moral problems" are the subject matter of literature, but that the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.
- 10) That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out the criticism (1979, 72-73).

This section focuses mainly in principles number 2, 4, 5, 9 and 10. Firstly, Cleanth Brooks’ concern with the problems of unity indicates a broader concern: how the poem is formally constructed as a single and organic creation. However, the insistence in harmony needs to be balanced. Sometimes, the structure of a poem, and its formal arrangement, are precisely showing how the poem is unable to construct a single unity of meaning, and how this

incapacity may be fruitful and interesting. Moreover, the unity of a poem must not be seen as a harmonious unity, since, in many cases, the unity is not complete, or the tension is not entirely resolved in the work. Poems can be full of contradictions, that are, sometimes, more important than the unity that the author tried to build.

Secondly, in a successful poem form and content cannot be separated. And why? Because the content of a poem is not fully formed until it is written. Content comes to be through a form and without a form does not exist. Poems are not simply ideas expressed in an eccentric language. Poems are ideas, images, emotions (and many other things), which are communicated through a formal structure, and a language or a way of talking, and they do not make sense, or lose much of their meaning, if we strip them of the form in which they appear. For example, if we take a monologue of Shakespeare and we write at its side, in a presupposed objective language, what the monologue is really saying, the two texts will probably tell different things, or at least, the deepness of the meaning of Shakespeare will be lost. In the same fashion, if we express in a poetic or metaphorical way a scientific statement the meaning of the statement will be lost. This point is closely connected with the intentional fallacy, one of the ideas of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, which, summed up, defends that the only intention of the author, which counts, is the one he/she was able to realize and make concrete in his/her works. For example, if an author has the intention of writing his/her best work, the one which is most accomplished and complete, and he/she actually thinks he/she succeeded, his/her opinion must be taken into account but it is not sufficient as an evidence. The definite proof is the book itself and the rest of his/her production. The following quote can clarify this point:

There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem. For all the objects of our manifold experience, especially for the intellectual objects, for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context- or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946, 12).

The fifth point is probably one of most complex ones. One of the main accusations against the New Critics is that they are formalist; they derive all the meaning and interest of a

poem from its form. This accusation is probably incorrect, as Welleck argues in his study of the New Critics:

The charge of formalism in any sense that is valid for the Russian school is completely off the mark. The New Critics are overwhelmingly concerned with the meaning of a work of art, with the attitude, the tone, the feelings, and even with the ultimate implied worldview conveyed. (Welleck, 1978, 618)

Being that the case, what exactly does Brooks mean when he says that form is meaning, especially if we take into account that for him content and form cannot be separated? First, what the author means by form is not exactly the same meaning that we normally give to the word. Form normally represents as what wraps up content or as something that may shape content, therefore, we could say that form is the way a particular content appears and is communicated to the reader.

If we follow this definition of form, we can easily arrive to the following argument: if form is the only the way an abstract content is presented, form is probably not very important when we focus on meaning. Meaning can be expressed in a different kind of language; the meaning of a poem could be paraphrased. In our previous Shakespeare example, we saw that paraphrasing poetry is something the New Critics completely rejected. Therefore, the meaning of form, in this statement by Cleanth Brooks, must be something different to the normal understanding of form. If form shapes content, form is not only something exterior to the meaning of the poem, is not only an embellishment of a conceptual structure; form is something more than a decoration. Form means something similar to the word structure, form is the structure of the poem, and this structure is not limited to the arrangement of the poem. Getting back to our argument, it is easy to see that when we read a poem, we see different kinds of structures, but in this case, we will focus, as Brooks does in only two.

We previously said that when we read a poem we could find two different kinds of structures. The second one is the structure that shapes the meaning of the poem. The poem communicates something to us, gives us some information, and this information is structured or organized in different parts. This kind of organization is not simply chronological; it is not an enumeration of the different ideas and images made by the poet. In Brooks's words:

The structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and

harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings. But even here one needs to make important qualifications: the principle is not one which involves the arrangement of the various elements into homogeneous groupings, pairing like with like. It unites the like with the unlike (Cleanth Brooks, 1949, 195).

Despite this clarification, it is still possible to hold that the meaning of a poem can be separated in two different structures, and that the structure of meanings can be completely disconnected from the form of the poem and, therefore it can be paraphrased. Indeed, the possibility of doing a paraphrase of the meaning of a poem is what sustains this division between the two kinds of structure. However, if in the paraphrase of the poem we lose fundamental parts of its meaning, it becomes very difficult to defend the separation between form and content. Again, as Brooks argues:

We can very properly use paraphrases as pointers and as shorthand references, provided that we know what we are doing. But it is highly important that we know what we are doing and that we see plainly that the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem (Cleanth Brooks, 1949, 196-197).

We can test the possibilities of doing a paraphrase that explains completely the meaning of a poem with a practical test. If we imagine a critic that tries to convey the meaning of a poem in a paraphrase, something like this will probably happen:

As his proposition approaches adequacy, he will find, not only that it has increased greatly in length, but that it has begun to fill itself up with reservations and qualifications-and most significant of all-the formulator will find that he has himself begun to fall back upon metaphors of his own in his attempt to indicate what the poem "says." In sum, his proposition, as it approaches adequacy, ceases to be a proposition (Cleanth Brooks, 1949, 181).

This is precisely the case with many of the creative critics, such as Northrop Frye, and probably also with some of the deconstruction critics. While trying to show to the reader all the meanings of a poem, and its "true" ideological content or the ideology hidden in it, they slowly move from a critical language to something that resembles more literature than

criticism. A possible solution to this problem, and an explanation of what Cleanth Brooks means, when he says that form is meaning could be the following. Form is meaning because form is the structure of a poem, and without a structure, a poem has no meaning. Without a structure, it is impossible to establish connections between the words that form a poem. A group of words randomly written in the form of a line can only have fanciful or random connections constructed by the reader. A poem, if it has meaning in itself, needs to have an intrinsic order, a form. This order of the poem, which, of course, can be obscure and fragmentary, is built by a connection between meanings and stylistic resources or literary techniques. To separate this connection, although it may be necessary for analytical purposes, means breaking the poem in pieces and thus deforming its meaning.

The ninth point expresses an important idea, which could be paraphrased as: literature is moral but not moralistic. Literature points to problems, situations and visions of the world but its purpose is not to give solutions to those situations. This does not mean that literature cannot give solutions or that the purpose of the author cannot be to point a moral. What it means is that the main purpose of literature is not morality or morals, although they appear in many occasions and they are fundamental for many authors. Literature contains a vision about specific situations, aspects, or elements of life and how they can affect us. For example, Tolstoy or Emily Bronte's novels evidently point to different kinds of morals. Other approaches, like deconstruction or the Marxist theory of literature, which are more historical and more focused on identities, will enlighten us about these problems. However, New Criticism defends that morality is not the main content of literature. In this case, one of the aspects of life, or specific moral problems, which appear in the poetry of Anne Michaels is memory and its relations with history, time, death or love.

Finally, the last principle of Brooks' list: "That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out the criticism". This point is especially relevant to this section. At this point, many possible objections can be rising in the mind of the reader and, probably, one of them could be something like, this is interesting (more or less) as a theoretical discussion, but how will the analysis be carried out? What is the relation of these principles with the concrete exercise of the analysis? To these objections, Brooks' last point gives an answer. The aim of this theoretical and methodological discussion is to show what the perspective of the thesis is, and the elements that are going to be discussed, but not how they are going to be analyzed. These theories provide a frame to the analysis, not a series of steps to follow.

The method, which will inform the analysis, is a close reading focused in the formal aspects of the poems, and the interactions between these formal aspects and the ideas found in the poems. For showing to the reader how the analysis is going to proceed is not useful at all to enumerate literary devices or to present a series of steps, since both will be confusing and probably too schematic. A close reading is better judged when it is done and finished. When an academic does research there are steps that can be followed, and practical advice that can be taken into account but at the end, the quality of the research is not judged by the methodological section but by how the actual research was carried out. To try to solve the problems of the analysis by a mechanic application of principles or methodologies can be especially harmful when literature is analyzed. A blindness to the importance of trying to understand the work in itself and not as a test to a theory is a mistake that this thesis tries to prevent.

## Selection and justification of the *corpus*

This section will try to justify the selection of poems we will analyze. The selection comprised three criteria: high quality of the poems, their capability of producing meaning when they are detached from the rest of the book, and their relation to memory. In this section, we will develop the reasons why the quality and the capacity to produce meaning on their own are important criteria to select the poems.

First, this thesis does not defend a subjective definition of quality. These poems are not the more interesting in general terms, and the personal taste of the researcher is not a relevant reason to choose them. Therefore, the definition of quality derives from the theories and principles previously outlined and the meaning of quality is a specific one. Quality, in this view, is defined by: a) the unity of the poems, the presence of different elements in the poems, in some cases with tensions or contradictions between them, but still articulated in a single whole; b) its concreteness, its capacity to indicate ideas, images, among other aspects, which, although they can be abstract and complex, are not vague.<sup>1</sup> These two poetical elements are also important for a reason related with the aim of the thesis. The objective is to analyze memory, and how the author articulates it. If the chosen poems are not rich enough in ideas to show different aspects of memory, the interpretation, which is limited because of the selection of the poems, will be even more confined and will lack in quality.

Second, if memory does not appear clearly in the poems, and the relations of memory with other ideas, although complex and difficult to grasp, are vague and weak or badly articulated, the analysis will be unable to produce anything relevant. If the poems do not have individuality, they cannot be explained outside their context, in this case the book where they were printed. Moreover, the capacity of a poem to hold its meaning when deprived of its context is a key test to clarify if the poem forms a complete unity or not. Following this guidelines the poems to be analyzed are “Memoriam” and “Words for the Body”, from the book *The Weight of Oranges* (1981).

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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that vagueness cannot be a theme of a poem. On the contrary, what I defend is that vagueness and lack of ability in a poet are not the same that vagueness as a theme in a poem.



## “Memoriam”

The first poem under analysis is “Memoriam”. It is formed by eight stanzas, which are not regular in its size: the biggest stanza is formed by fifteen lines and the shorter one has only one line. The irregularity of the stanzas sometimes facilitates the transitions of the poem and separates it in different thematic parts. The analysis of the poem will have two moments: firstly, each stanza will be analyzed explaining the meaning it tries to project and which resources are used to do it; secondly, the explanation will try to understand the whole meaning of the poem and the connections of this meaning with memory. This process will also be applied to the other poem under analysis.

- 1      In lawnchairs under stars. On the dock
- 2      at midnight, anchored by winter clothes,
- 3      we lean back to read the sky. Your face white
- 4      in the womb light, the lake’s electric skin.
  
- 5      Driving home from Lewiston, full and blue, the moon
- 6      over one shoulder of highway. There,
- 7      or in your kitchen at midnight, sitting anywhere
- 8      in the seeping dark, we bury them again and
- 9      again under the same luminous thumbprint.

The first two stanzas produce two different effects. They construct a situation with two subjects – “we” –, who will appear several times in the rest of the poem, and two fundamental spatial qualities. The relation between the two poetical subjects is developed throughout the poem, and does not make too much sense to focus on it at this step of the analysis, but the two spatial qualities are fundamental.

“Darkness” dominates the two situations. The source of light in both stanzas, until the last two lines of the second stanza, is the “moon”. The structure of the two stanzas is similar, constructing a situation with a descriptive and neutral language, and then the language is modified, changing the understanding of the scene using a reference to light.

In the first stanza, this modification of the situation is caused by the use of “light” and by the alteration of two of the main components of the situation constructed in the stanza: “the night light and the lake”. The alteration is produced by the word “womb” and by the expression “electric skin”. The function of lines three to four of this stanza is to connect the different elements of the scene. There are multiple connections between the three elements of these lines (the lake’s surface, the face, and the light). The “lake’s surface”, because presented as a skin, relates immediately to the face and, at the same time, the “whiteness of the face”, produced by the light, is similar to the reflection of the moon and the stars upon the surface of the lake. The use of womb defines the light in two directions: first as something that creates and produces, as well as a shelter. This first situation of the poem, which by the connections between humanity (the face) and nature (the lake) achieved by the light are broken in the next stanzas and in the rest of the poem.

There is also an internal rhyme in the last two lines of the stanza which connect “face white” with “womb light”. The sonorous contrast with the last part of the stanza, the “lake’s electric skin”, related with the proceeding change of situation, closes and completes the stanza. Another relevant technique, which will appear in other parts of the poem, is using the lines of the poem to separate and bring attention to the different elements of a scene. For example, in the transition from lines 1 to 2 the poem creates a separation between the spatial situation of the scene “on the dock” and the time and general quality of the scene “at midnight”. In the case of lines 3 to 4 the disposition of the line separates “face white” and “womb light”, two of the three elements of the comparison that the poem does (between the face and the surface of the lake). The use of lines to separate different elements and, in that way, to control the focus of the reader without using comas, and changing the rhythm of the stanza, will appear regularly in the poem. In this case, the rhythm is maintained by the internal rhyme between “white” and “womb”.

In the second stanza, there are two other different situations: a journey and people sitting in a kitchen. The key elements of both situations are, again, the light. In the first case because of the “full and blue moon”, and in the second because of the seeping dark and luminous “thumbprint”. There is a thematic transition between these two stanzas. The poem starts in a semi-natural environment, close to a lake, then a journey and finally a home. This transition also relates to light. The poem moves from a light, which is a “womb” and connects humanity and nature to a light that “buries the dead”.

In the second stanza, there are some examples of the use of lines to develop the rhythm and the disposition of the elements of the poem. From lines 5 to 7 the poem firstly

isolates and brings attention to “the moon” at the end of the line. After that, strangely the sixth line breaks, leaving only the word “There,” focusing the attention of the reader on the different places where the poetical subjects are affected by the “seeping dark”: “There, or in your kitchen at midnight, sitting anywhere in the seeping dark” (lines 6 to 8). There is also a powerful sonority in line 6 caused by the connection of the words “full, blue and moon”. By dividing the expression “again and again” between lines 8 and 9 the poem achieves an anadiplosis, which helps to maintain its flow until the end of the stanza.

The last lines (from 7 to 9) of the second stanza are especially complex. The complexity revolves around the presence of “light”. First, we are situated at midnight, a moment of the night where there is complete “darkness”. Presumably, light cannot change at that moment of the night, as could happen at dusk, for example. However, the author uses the expression: “sitting anywhere in the seeping dark”. This expression has two effects, one in terms of space and the other related to light. Although the action is clearly located in a home, the kitchen, the adverb anywhere dislocates the position of the poetical subjects from the scene. They could be anywhere, thus, they seem confused or lost, they are scattered. On the other hand, there is “seeping dark”. The first obvious question, would be – what exactly do people in a kitchen at midnight, seemingly without any purpose in particular? At least in the previous situations they were watching the stars, or traveling. Then, if it is midnight how can darkness be seeping? In purely physical terms night at midnight does not become more “dark”, therefore this seeping “dark”, seems to be a psychological one: darkness slowly permeates and filters inside the poetical subjects. In the previous stanza, which also happens at night, there is a balanced relationship between darkness and light. In this one, a conflict appears: light buries consistently (“we bury them again and again under the same luminous thumbprint”). “Light” stops to be a “womb”, which is something related with life and, instead, it is something that buries. Moreover, when the poetical subjects “bury the dead under light”, they do it repeatedly (again and again under the same light), and the burial leaves a clear mark, a thumbprint. There is not only a transition between places, but also a transition, by the use of multiple references to light, and a final reference to burial, between stability or tranquility to sadness or death? The next stanza reinforces the transition in the next stanza, which contains only one line:

10      The dead leave us starving with mouths full of love.

The line that remains isolated in the poem has multiple functions in its structure. The line gives a name to the previous them (“we bury them again and again...”), the things that are buried are the dead and the memory we have of them. The line also causes a transition in the poem that, instead of evolving through a smooth transition, has its balance broken, and forces the reader to a completely different scenario. The powerful language of the line produces this and the key words are “dead, starving and mouths full of love”. The connection between “starving” and “mouths full”, and the relation between “the dead” and “full of love” are the words sustaining the line and give to it its power, and the capacity to break the flow of the poem. The poem, with the end of the previous stanza, (“we bury them again and again...”) started a transition that line 10 concludes.

This line tries to convey the incapacity and the contradiction caused by the departure that cannot be filled, since the poetical subjects have their “mouths full”, and thus they cannot “swallow”, so they “starve”. There is a rich symbolism in the word “mouth”. When we have something in our mouth, we can swallow it or spit it, and, likewise, we cannot talk. The line is a complex articulation of “grief”. The absence of the dead leaves us starving, and we cannot “swallow” the love we had for them, precisely because it was a love that we had for them, and not for ourselves. It is a love that wants to be shared or communicated and not owned, and we cannot get rid of it, because it is also connected to the “memories” we have of the dead.

11     Their stones are salt and mark where we look back.  
12     Your mother’s hand at the end of an empty sleeve,  
13     scratching at your palm, drawing blood.  
14     Your aunt in a Jewish graveyard in Poland,  
15     her face a permanent fist of pain.  
16     Your first friend, Saul, who died faster than  
17     you could say forgive me.  
18     When I was nine and crying from a dream  
19     you said words that hid my fear.  
20     Above us the family slept on,  
21     mouths open, hands scrolled.  
22     Twenty years later your tears burn the back of my throat.  
23     Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist.  
24     Earth crumbles from your fist under the sky’s black sieve.

Line 11 has again the “dead” as its subject, as did the last lines of the second stanza and the third one. The line refers to the story of Lot in the Bible but, in this case, the reference is not about the story but about the symbolism attached to it.

In the story of Lot, if you look to the past or to the city being destroyed by God you become a “salt stone”. There is a prohibition to look to the past or to look to the wrath of God destroying a city, perhaps equivalent, in modern terms, as watching a traumatic event. The story tries to block, with a prohibition, the trauma that being unable to leave the past behind can cause. In the case of this line, the trauma has already happened: “their stones are salt”. However, what is the cause of the trauma? Why are their stones salt? Precisely because the subject who looks back, the one who causes, by looking back to the past, his/her own memories become “salt stones”. Memories become not only static and therefore trapped in the past, and in the present of the poetical subject, but they also are irredeemable. Although they are preserved, which is one of the functions of salt, they are also dead, or against life, because salt does not allow life to grow. A salt stone remains unchanged.

Lines 12 to 17 set the tone of the first part of the stanza, consisting in an enumeration of different moments, all in some way are “salt stones”. Lines 12 to 21 of the stanza are deeply influenced by line 11. These lines are also arranged in a way that helps to enhance their meaning. All these lines describe scenes with two elements that can be read as a single sentence. In this part of the poem, the lines are arranged in a way that each sentence is divided in two lines, and each line contains one of the important elements that constitute the sentence. For example, in lines 14 and 15 appears, firstly, the aunt buried in a faraway graveyard, and afterwards the pain that she suffered: “her face a permanent fist of pain”. The key tool to achieve this arrangement are the comas that separate the lines, with the exception of lines 16 and 17, and connect each pair of lines and, at the same time, allowing the reader to separate the two parts of the sentence that they form part. The first three “sentences” are memories which, by a traumatic reason (illness, death, and political tragedy), cannot be redeemed. They leave a mark that cannot be transformed. All the sentences work in a similar way, they present who is the person at the center of the traumatic memory and then they present the cause of the trauma, and how the trauma relates to the addressed poetical subject – “You”.

In line 13, the expression “drawing blood” is especially remarkable to understand how memory appears in the poem. “Memory” has a bodily effect, “blood” is closely connected to

the “body”, to matter and, in this case, and especially because it is the “mother”, who is doing the action, the bodily or instinctive connection between individuals (in these case the kinship between mother and child?). However, “blood” is a reference to a part of the body, which can be corrupted, it can be changed and it can be mixed. At the same time, “blood”, especially between mother and child, points more to a relationship than to a fixed thing or object, (this does not mean that relationships are less strong or permanent than things). The word “blood” refers to a dual relation: how a relationship of kinship can be strong enough to leave a mark, which changes the “body” of a person, and how a memory can redraw the “body”. The references to illness – your “mother’s hand at the end of an empty sleeve” – reinforces these bodily meanings of the line. Precisely in the moment when the body is weaker, practically non-existent because of illness, it can still mark the body of the addressed subject.

In lines 18 and 19, the poem starts another transition. Although the two lines still refer to a “memory”, and a traumatic one, the subject affected by this “memory” changes. This change of subject continues in the rest of the stanza. The traumatic nature of the sentence is built around two ideas: “a child being awoken in the night by a nightmare”. Again, we have the “night” as an important element of the situation in which the poem develops; and the contrast with the vulnerability, and indifference of the family sleeping in the floor above the child. The next line is very significant for the poem, and it will reappear in its last stanza: “you said words that hid my fear”. The main tension of these two lines is the contrast between “the fear of the little child”, how the other unnamed subject poetical tries to console him/her, and the tranquility and indifference of rest of the family. There is also a reference to what could be the function of poetry: to keep away harmful realities, and help us to cope with words. The word “mouth” appears again, as an indicator of a peaceful sleep, but also of vulnerability; and the verb “to scroll”, pointing out to a movement of the hands, which are enclosed in themselves and held together. Moreover, lines 18-21 isolate the two poetical subjects, since they are cut off from the rest of the family. This isolation and the relationship that appears between the two main poetical subjects of the poem will become more important in the last stanzas of the poem, and is a key element to understand its meaning. In the next lines, 22 to 25, which close the stanza, some changes occur that lead to different meanings. The first purpose is to hold the stanza together, although the change is so powerful that this aim is difficult to fulfill, and the second is to close the stanza in itself, allowing the rest of the poem to reconnect with the scenarios of the previous stanzas. The organization of these lines is also different and is probably connected with their content. The previous lines tried to portray scenes, memories of the poetical subjects of the poem. In this case, the poem changes

its object, dwells in a more metaphorical content, and changes its style to something resembling aphorisms. Because of this, each line from 22 to 25 appears as a single sentence that reads in only one strike. In the previous lines, the most important element for the rhythm and connection of the lines, as well as their meaning, were the comas that separated the lines. In this case, it is the dot that gives and enhances gravity to each line and projects a powerful meaning to each line.

The key elements of line 22 are time, “twenty years later”, the bodily reference, “throat”, which grounds the feeling, and “tears”, representing sadness. This line tries to represent the incapacity of one of the poetical subjects to ease the suffering of the other. The “back of the throat” is a place of the “body” that is not very accessible. You cannot free yourself from a burning in the “back of your throat”. Moreover, the response one of the poetical subjects has is passive; he/she suffers because of the emotions of the other, but he/she only rejoins them, seeming unable to offer any kind of consolation.

The next line (23) – “Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist” - is the first direct reference to memory. Again, a bodily image projects multiple meanings to the reader. The key elements to construct the image are “the hand” and “grave”. The symbol of the “hand” does not seem to have important connections with other parts of the poem. The image seems to work opposing two principles, one active and another passive. “Memory” connects with the “hand”, the line taints “memory” as an active function, as something that “grabs” and “holds”. However, memory, represented by the “hand”, is trapped “in a grave by the wrist”. The “wrist” is the point of connection of the “hand” with the rest of the “body”. If memory is trapped it loses its functions and, at the same time, the rest of the body is incapable of moving. The poetical subject is incapable of relating with his past and, at the same time, he is unable to relate with the present and with his body. In addition to this, the “grave” has clear negative connections associated with “the dead” as they appeared in previous lines of the poem. In all those lines, “the dead” were connected with a feeling of dissatisfaction (thirst) and also of suffering and sadness.

In the case of this line, the connotations of the word “grave” are articulated by the preceding lines, which relate “death” and “grave” with unredeemable “time”, trapped or frozen (“salt stones”). Therefore, this line implies that all these meanings are connected. It articulates the intrinsic connections within the poem: time is unredeemable, memories are frozen when we look back at them, and, besides, when we look at them we become impotent and we are trapped close to the dead.

The following line - “Earth crumbles from your fist under the sky’s black sieve” - continues to articulate these meanings, adding more layers to the structure of the poem. The line gives continuity to the previous ones by using again a connection to the “hand”/ “fist” as a symbol. In the previous line, the “hand” was related with memory and the “grave”. In contrast, in this line, what appears is the “sky”, again connected with darkness. The line seems to continue the symbolism of the hand as a representative of “memory”. “Memory”, as a “hand”, is trapped in a “grave”, also part of the “earth”, but when memory is able to get away from the grave it does not find anything, only “dirt”. Moreover, the meaning of the earth is even more difficult to understand because of the darkness of the “sky”. The use of the word sieve is a key to understand the meaning of this line. A “sieve” is a tool to select and to separate good or useful material from useless ones. A “black sieve” can have two effects: to select the bad elements instead of the good ones, or to be unable to fulfill its function. Both meanings make sense in relation with the other parts of the line. Besides, the random selection made by a “fist that lets earth fall to the ground” can be related with a “black sieve”, which is unable to select between the materials that pass through it. The “black sieve” could also be a reference to “time”: “the dead”, with time, become only “earth”, and the importance of them, of their memories, disappears.

The other important word is “sky”. The “sky” is an indication of the presence of nature. The reference to earth reinforces this effect, since, from the line related with “memory” and the “grave”, which are concepts that belong to a human space, the poem moves to the space of nature, where human concepts may not apply. Finally, the word “crumble” is significant to articulate the full meaning of the line. “Crumble” taints with a psychological element the rest of the line. To crumble means to fall apart in fragments but also to decay.

The last line of the stanza (25), by the use of a direct language, gives a final shape to the other lines. The stanza built a sense of separation in different steps, firstly from family, because of the incapacity to relate with the sadness of another human being. After this separation, appears the incapacity to relate with “memory” and the process how the past takes hold of the poetical subject, trapping it in the past and the dead and, finally, how this relationship becomes meaningless in the face of nature and time. To complete the meaning the stanza concludes with the line “We are orphaned one by one”. The connotations of this line point to two ideas: firstly, because “we are orphaned” something is lacking, and secondly that what “we lack” is connected with the past. An orphan does not have a past or, at least,



there is a disconnection from it. At the end, both poetical subjects are harmed and, at the same time, disconnected from their past, one that remains impossible to redeem.

26     On the beach at Superior, you found me  
27     where I'd been for hours, cut by the lake's sharp rim.  
28     You stopped a dozen feet from me.  
29     What passed in that quiet said:  
30     I have nothing to give you.

The fifth stanza changes the scenario but, in this case, the poem comes back to a place similar to the space where it started. The use of continuous breaks in the lines of the previous stanza, and also how the poem isolates the two poetical subjects in lines 26 and 27, (living “you found me” disconnected at the end on the line) can be related with the difficulties of a fractured, divided in images, that sometimes are traumatic. The language of the stanza shows this change and the lines play again with the technique that appeared previously at the beginning of the poem: to describe a scenario and then, in the last moments of the stanza, to modulate the scenario around an emotion or an image. The descriptive language used situates the action in a particular place, “Lake Superior”, and in how the poem positions the poetical subjects: first, in the shore of the lake, and then separated only by a dozen feet. In these lines, the poem connects the description of how the poetical subjects are situated in the space with the emotion that it is trying to project: “you stopped a dozen feet from me”. The last two lines give a meaning to the scene and transform the scenario from a natural description to an emotional projection. The lines project the impossibility of giving something, or passing something between generations, or between different individuals. In this stanza, the central element constructing the situation is the expression “what passed in that quiet”. These words is able to depict the separation between two individuals and how the silence that appears between them can also have a meaning. The only response found to traumatic events is silence. There is a contrast between the sad memories that both poetical subjects share and the incapacity to balance with something positive.

31     At dusk, birch forest is a shore of bones.  
32     I've pulled stones from the earth's black pockets,  
33     felt the weight of their weariness – worn,  
34     exhausted from their sleep in the earth.

35 I've written on my skin with their black sweat.

The next stanza humanize “nature”, and mix different elements that appeared in previous parts of the poem. Forests become “bones” (the connection is easily done because of the “whiteness” of the “birch tree”), which also causes that earth being transformed in flesh. Stones also represent flesh, and therefore the “body”. The use of “sweat”, to define the dirt attached to “stones” supports this identification. Moreover, the appearance of skin in the same line reinforces the effect. The words used to define the stones: “weariness, worn, exhausted”, could be related with emotions that the poetical subject feels and that are projected in nature. The words “weight”, “weariness” and “worn”, all of them in line 33, produce an alliteration and a striking rhythm. The internal rhyme enhances the fluidity of the line but at the same time, the line ends abruptly with the word “worn” that remains isolated by a dash at the end. This distribution of the line probably envisions enhancing the importance of “worn” but, at the same time, it connects lines 33 and 34. Both lines attribute qualities to the stones, and have a peculiar rhythm, caused by how “worn” is located and by how the last coma of line 33 works. Thus, lines 32, 33 and 34 are semantically and poetically connected.

However, “weight”, “weariness” and “worn” are also adjectives applicable to “memories”. The stones taken from the “earth” can be memories pulled from the past. If we take into account the weight that “memory” has in the rest of the poem, this interpretation, supported by more evidence found in the following lines of the poem, seems possible.

36 The lake's slight movement is stilled by fading light.

37 Soon the stars' tiny mouths, the moon's blue mouth.

This is the second shortest stanza of the poem. In it, there is an internal rhyme in line 36 (“slight”, “stilled” and “light”) and a repetition in 37 (“mouths” and “mouth”). The third stanza of the poem functioned as a division, and helped to do a transition between the description of scenarios to the description of memories. This stanza allows the poem to move from a description of memories and scenarios to its conclusion. It allows the poem to wrap itself up. The descriptive qualities of these two lines conclude the descriptions of the poem and close the main scenario (the shore of the lake) where part of the action of the poem happened. It describes a particular scenario where “night arrives”, but the lines do not mention “darkness”, merely alluding to it by referring to the fading of light. The lines project

calmness, especially after the previous two stanzas that are physical and dark. This sense of calmness builds around the expressions slight movement and stilled. In these lines, the scenario moves gradually and, at the same time, time seems to be suspended. In other lines, the intensity of the image projected seems to freeze time, to fix moments in the past, but, in these lines, “night” slowly comes and the “surface of the lake” moves and time passes gently.

38 I have nothing to give you, nothing to carry,  
39 some words to make me less afraid, to say  
40 you gave me this.  
41 Memory insists with its sea voice,  
42 muttering from its bone cave.  
43 Memory wraps us  
44 like the shell wraps the sea.  
45 Nothing to carry,  
46 some stones to fill our pockets,  
47 to give weight to what we have.

This is the last stanza of the poem and some of its structural characteristics are important to understand its meaning. Firstly, this stanza has the shorter lines of the whole poem. Secondly, in this last stanza, especially because of the shortness of some of the lines, they play an important role drawing the attention of the reader to different elements. For example, in line 39, the poem isolates “to say” with a coma at the end of the line, making the next line (40) stand alone: “you gave me this”. In this case, we might venture a connection of this line with line 30 (“I have nothing to give you”) and the next lines of the stanza. Moreover, lines 43 and 44, which project the last and probably the most important metaphor of the poem, constitute a single sentence not divided by comas, just separated in two lines, each line being one of the elements of the metaphor. The reason this stanza appears in these short lines is probably to bring attention to the elements that are contained in the stanza, which refer to other lines of the poem. The last three lines of the poem (45,46 and 47), forming sentence divided in three, increases the sensation of a closure, the poem at the end is restating some of the ideas of previous stanzas, arrives to a conclusion, a final idea that is similar to an argument. The poem is set up in a way that the conclusions have to be read more slowly because of the short lines that break the sentences that conform them. Thirdly, it is a purely imaginative stanza. There is not a single reference to what we could consider a real

scenario. In the rest of the stanzas, there is always a reference to nature, or a concrete memory of one of the poetical subjects.

The stanza is constructed in three different parts. The first part goes from lines 38 to 40, the second from lines 41 to 44, and the third from lines 45 to 47. Line 38 is a repetition of the theme of “separation”, and of the impossibility of “communication” between the poetical subjects. The whole poem offers a reason to this incapacity: there is nothing to give because there is nothing valuable to pass on. Everything that the poetical subjects have is not enough, does not have enough consistency, enough weight.

Line 39 refers to a previous stanza, and changes the roles of the poetical subjects. In the past, one of the poetical subjects was able to hide the fears of the other. Now, those words that calmed the other, are only able to reduce the fear, they do not dissipate it, and they are a testimony that something, even if it is only silence, passed between them. These lines must be understood as a response to the closing lines of the fifth stanza: “what passed in that quiet said: I have nothing to give you”.

One of the fundamental characteristics of this poem is how it oscillates between two different positions: “memories” mean nothing, they are like “earth falling from a fist”, and we are all “orphaned” from our past, or “memories” are still important and they remain within us, shaping us. These two different meanings were built in the fourth stanza, the backbone of the poem, and they are untangled in the last one: although there is nothing to give, memory still comes back. The continued coming back of memory is represented with a metaphor about the sea, forming the second part of the stanza (lines 41 to 44).

41     Memory insists with its sea voice,  
42     muttering from its bone cave.  
43     Memory wraps us  
44     like the shell wraps the sea.

These four lines are very rich in meaning and they contain the main idea that closes the poem. These lines are built to present in each line one of the elements that forms the metaphor. In line 41, the sea is the voice of memory; in line 42, how this voice communicates and where it comes from; in line 43, what memory does to “us”, what the voice does to “us” and, finally, in line 44 how it affects “us” and how both poetical subjects are related to it. The poem uses the sound of the “sea” (the sea voice) to define “memory”. The sound of the sea is continuous, when we are close, it is always there, and it dominates the scenario: if we are

close to the sea it is very difficult to ignore it, it is a sound that is atmospheric, covers and defines the entire scene. Besides, by referring to the sea, immediately one brings to mind qualities associated with it like its immensity or its deepness. The next line further completes the meaning of “memory” by the use of the word “muttering”. This word defines a sound in three different ways: its intelligibility, its insistence, and its intensity. The “sound of memory” is difficult to understand, but is always there, and although it is a weak “sound”, which does not dominate completely, one cannot stop hearing it. The last part of the line: “muttering from its bone cave”, further develops this idea: “bone” connects the sound of “memory” with the references to the “body” which appeared in the rest of the poem, memory resonates in a “cave made by bones”. Because “a cave” is the source of the sound, this could be an “echo”, which caves, sometimes produces, and further connects the sound with the past.

Lines 43 and 44 continue these associations of “memory” with a “sound”. Using the likeness to the “shell”, another layer of meaning appears. The complete metaphorical meaning is constructed in three levels: the “sea”, the “shell”, and the sound of the sea contained by the “shell”. The poetical subjects of the poem, but also the reader, are, at the same time, the “sea” that provided the “shell” with a “sound” and the “sound” contained in the “shell”. Memory collects our “lives” but, like in the “sound” kept by the “shell”, the “sea” is lost in part. In “memory”, represented by the “shell”, our “lives” are lost. Memory “wraps” us in a form that is only substituted by a “sound” or an “echo”. The stanza finishes repeating its first lines: “nothing to carry”. It refers to the “stones” as a representation of “memories”. Memories at the end become something that, although they do not have too much value, are the only thing that can add some meaning to our “lives”: some weight to what we have. Also a second interpretation may be complementary: all what we have is precisely “memories”, and the futility of giving weight to them is represented by the action of gravating “stones” on the “shore”. Their tiny “weight” is an analogy to the “weight” that we have, to the things that give “weight” to what we are.

The stanza, and the whole poem, works in these two directions and plays with these ambiguities. Memories “burn us” and “trap us”, they have an incredible intensity (an ill mother drawing blood in the hand of her son, despair and sadness for not being able to share love with the people that are gone) but we lost their meaning, or their meaning leaves us more and more alone: “we are orphaned, one by one”. We are disconnected from our past and we have nothing to give each other and, at the end, the value of both our memories and our past, which is the only thing that grounds us, is like the “weight” of some “stones” picked in the shore of a lake or the “earth falling from a fist”.



## “Words for the Body”

“Words for the body” is the closing poem of *The Weight of Oranges* (1986). The main idea being developed in this thesis argues that one of the key elements to analyze Michaels’ poetry is the structural and formal features of a poem, that consist on how the different parts of it are related between themselves in order to communicate a meaning. These structural arrangements can also be found between different poems of the same book: a poem can be a response to a question asked by another poem. “*Words for the body*” is, to a point, a response to some of the questions “*Memoriam*” asked. If in “*Memoriam*” we are faced with a picture of human relationships, one that is pessimistic, “*Words for the body*” gives some answers to that pessimism.

The poem is divided in five numbered sections.. As in “*Memoriam*” the poem does not follow any particular pattern in its arrangement, and the stanzas vary a lot in their themes, in the number of lines and the language they use. The poem functions as a narrative, telling the story of two poetical subjects in different moments of time. The poem begins with these three stanzas:

- 1      We knew we’d reached Dunn Lake
- 2      because the trees stopped.
  
- 3      Chilled and sweating under winter clothes
- 4      we stood in the damp degenerated afternoon.
- 5      We grew up waiting together by water,
- 6      frozen or free,
- 7      in summer under the cool shaggy umbra of firs,
- 8      or in the aquarium light of birches.
  
- 9      It’s always been this way between us.
- 10     We reach lakes and then we just stand there.
- 11     Silence fills us with silence.

The first stanza has only two lines, opens the story and provides one of the scenarios

of the poem. These lines are effective for various reasons: through them, we know the poem is about a plural “we”, that are going to be two, and provides a scenario for the following lines, connecting the scenario with one of the images which will appear repeatedly in the poem: “a lake surrounded by trees”.

The two remaining stanzas continue to introduce the scene. The poetical subjects were presented in the middle of an action, since they were reaching a lake. The following lines provide a background to this action, to this memory; they provide a past to the individuals. The poem continues to build up a scenario that appears in different forms: the poetical subjects visited the lake in summer and in winter.

12     When we were fourteen  
13     you read to me about Landowska, who  
14     “tottered the world and stopped the sun when she held a note.”  
15     We argued over interpretation  
16     until we were sixteen and discovered Casals:  
17     “the best musician learns to play what’s not on the page.”  
18     We decided music is memory  
19     the way a word is the memory of its meaning.

This section develops the relationship between the poetical subjects. The poem shows what connects them: “music”, as a form of language, and memory. Music and language are a central part of this poem. Music or literature, are ways of expressing something, but they are also a way of relating with the world, of interpreting it. What unites the poetical subjects is this preoccupation with music and language: “We argued over interpretation until we were sixteen and discovered Casals”. The importance of perfection appears very early in the poem because of the quotation used to refer to Landowska. The poem employs a classic trope: the ability of the musician, or the poet, to control nature with their ability. However, the way this trope appears is not innocent, since it projects two ideas: the true musician is able to shake the world, to transform it and, maybe because of this, to understand it better. The stanza further develops the idea that “language, words, notes” are not enough, there is something outside the page which needs to be expressed, and only when it is expressed the function of “language” is fulfilled. The stanza ends insisting on the common goal of both poetical subjects.

The last two lines are a way to understand representation. “Memory” and



representation are connected in these lines. The connection can be understood as a triangle: there is “music”, or “words”, which are representation and are, to a point, empty; then there is “memory”, and then “meaning”. Without memory words are not able to mean anything but, at the same time, in the “words” it is contained, as a “memory”, their “meaning”, thus they are not completely separated. “Music” gives to us a “meaning” as memory brings us reality, when we “remember”, reality comes to us contained in a form as a moment of the past, and, in “music”, meaning appears formed by the notes, which express the emotions. In both cases, reality and meaning are behind expression. Moreover, words are charged with personal memories, the word “lake” does not mean the same thing to different individuals. In the same way, “music” brings different realities and memories to different individuals.

20     The first time I knew what we were trying for  
21     I was waiting on the back porch while you practiced.  
22     Piano flickered the leaves, evening in perfect summer,  
23     temperature the same inside and outside my body,  
24     night pigment in my skin.

After saying what connects the poetical subjects the poem brings them together back again, to the moment the narrator realizes the common goal they share. The connection between them is expressed in different ways:

a) As a realization of a common goal ( lines 20 and 21), b) as a connection between what they are doing and “nature”, forming a coherent scene “piano flickered the leaves”, c) as a bodily and harmonic relationship with “nature”: “temperature the same inside and outside my body, night pigment in my skin”. All these connections are atmospheric; their function is to create a scene and a context to the narration that contains the poetical subjects: a moment they are part of. They are shown in a moment but it is not a static one, it is not a sudden realization or a shock that freezes time. The scene has dynamism; time passes in the images that form it. One of the poetical subjects, that is also the narrator in this section of the poem, is still and sensuous, and her full body is affected. This bodily grounding of memory will grow more important as the poem evolves.

25     In that swathing twilight  
26     I knew you’d had a lover.  
27     Everything became part of that new perception.

28     The yard disappeared.  
29     Sudden as my sense of your body,  
30     I knew you were attempting silence.  
31     To move an audience  
32     until they aren't listening.

One of the main characteristics of the poem is how it organizes its lines to present successive scenes connected between them. In the previous stanza (25-32) each line has a purpose: it points to a scene, to a characteristics of the scene, or to something the scene causes. The lines are short and constructed by separating the key elements of each scene created. The “swathing twilight”, which leaves a “mark”, (leaving a mark, remaining, is one of the fundamental poetical characteristics of memory), works in two directions: to the memories described in the previous stanza and to the ones developed between lines 25 to 32. The meaning of the rest (lines 25 and 26) is also ambiguous. The “lover” of the second poetical subject (“you”) can be “music” but can be an actual “lover”. If it is the second case, the unity of purpose of the poetical subjects is broken and an interesting tension appears in the poem.

The most probable one is that the “lover is music” or the “audience”. The stanza then moves in three steps: realization or understanding, effect of the realization in the poetical subject and development of what is supposedly understood. These steps are constructed upon ideas present in previous stanzas, the poem starts to work as a structure. For example, the conclusion (lines 31 and 32), and the importance of “silence” in that conclusion cannot be explained without the previous appearances of “silence” and, especially, without the reference to “playing what is not in the page”. The poem is building an atmosphere, a dynamic image that is complete and encapsulates the whole reality of a poetical subject in a moment of time.

In the same direction go lines 27 and 28: “Everything became part of that new perception. /The yard disappeared”. The understanding changes all the reality of the poetical subject and the surroundings disappear, she/he and an idea dominates. The understanding is immediate and physical (line 29). Finally, the previous ideas about “languages” are further developed. Language and music should communicate what is behind language and music, what they remember: “To move an audience/ until they aren't listening”. To touch an audience until it stops relating to the sound and the words and begins to relate to what is expressed by them, to what is behind them.

33 We believed in our head perfect version,  
34 but you couldn't make your hands, and  
35 I couldn't make my words, pronounce it.

36 Even now when I hear you play  
37 I think of a lover, gasping at the gate  
38 of another, who suddenly knows  
39 love has no power to make it right.

In the first stanza (lines 33 to 35) there is an interesting rhythmic progression caused by the use of commas and by leaving the word “and” at the end of line 34. The stanza functions like a logical statement, joining the two poetical subjects around the incapacity of expressing that they suffer. In the second stanza (lines 36-39), each line of the poem, with the exception of “lover” and “love” finishes with the most important word of the line, marking its importance: “play” that is related with expression, “gate” that represents separation and “knows” and “right” connected with the perception of the incapacity to produce a perfect artistic expression of the poetical subjects.

In the previous theoretical section of the thesis, it was mentioned that, when the New Critics talked about harmony they did not mean connection without contradiction. These two stanzas, which finish the second section of the poem, are precisely where contradiction appears. If the poem wants to express important ideas or emotions, it needs to absorb and make sense of some kind of contradiction. Moreover, this poem is telling a story, the story needs some kind of tension to evolve, some problem that the poetical subjects have to solve. The contradiction that appears in the poem is between ideas and reality, or about ideals, and how to materialize ideals in reality, how to make them physical.

The metaphor of the lover expresses this emotion is expressed by the metaphor of the lover (lines 36 to 39) which, if it is when analyzed more closely, it is more ambiguous than could seem at first sight. The metaphor implies separation, but is not only the separation of the poetical subjects from their ideal, it can also be how the failure to fulfill that ideal causes their separation; “gasping” implies activity, they failed but they tried, the contradiction appears because of their activity and it shows commitment. Love is finally introduced in the poem, although it was implied in the previous stanzas. The poetical subjects are probably lovers but this relationship is not the fundamental element, the importance is the objective

that both have in common.

40     The summer you stopped playing  
41     we were driving home from the farm,  
42     windows full of stars on the dark highway,  
43     legs bare on vinyl seats, night air  
44     cold and new as from the sea.

45     In a voice that came from the highway  
46     you described the blackness where music waits,  
47     tormenting until you draw it out,  
48     a redemption.  
49     Then the fear of forgetting notes  
50     disappears, the fingers have a memory of their own.  
51     You spoke of a kind of hunger  
52     that makes pleasure perfect.  
53     Then you said how it was to be opened  
54     and tasted by a hall full of people.

In these two stanzas, it appears that the collocation of the lines has again an important role in the poem. The first stanza (lines 40 to 44) can be read as only one sentence. Because of this, the rhythm, organized by the disposition of the commas, and the different meanings the lines have, the arrangement used is especially important. Each of the lines provides one element to the scene the poem is describing: in line 40, the main event of the stanza; in line 41, the physical situation of the poetical subjects; in line 42, a modulation of the scene that provides also an atmosphere (“night”) to the action; finally, lines 43 and 44 continue this building up of the scene insisting on “night” and “summer” as the main elements of the scene.

The first part of the second stanza (lines 45 to 48) may also be read as a sentence organized in four lines. In both cases, the structure in many of the lines is a tool to organize their meaning and point to the different elements form them. The main element of this sentence is its conclusion, in line 48. “A redemption” is one of the key ideas of the whole poem and, maybe because of this, it is separated in a different line. In the case of the next lines (49 to 54) their construction has a pattern that appears many times in the poem: an idea,

with two main elements, that is constructed in a single sentence divided in two lines. In many cases, the second element is a response to the first one. For example, in lines 51 and 52, the answer to the “hunger”, what fills that need is “pleasure” and, at the same time, the kind of “hunger” that the poem talks about is what allows pleasure to happen: a kind of hunger creates an especial pleasure. In these stanzas, the poem is similar to a confession. Firstly, the space for the confession appears - the car at night. The confession begins with a reference to “darkness”, and how one of the poetical subject tries to pull something valuable from it. There is an evident analogy in how one of the poetical subjects tries to draw out “music”, and how, in the conversation they are having at “night”, something similar is happening to them. They are also drawing out from darkness “words” to explain themselves. The poem is also writing memories from the past, since “darkness” can be seen as illuminated by “memory”. The bridge between these two moments happens in the line 45, which has the function of connecting the previous scene, “a travel”, with the next scene, “a conversation”: “In a voice that came from the highway”.

The stanza continues with a conversation, where the ideas the poetical subjects have about artistic expression are developed. A key theme of the poem is the ability to express meaning through the relationship of art and memory. Analogies between memory and artistic expression will appear constantly in the following lines. The poem insists that behind language or music there is meaning and, as can be seen in the analysis of the previous stanzas, the poem builds up a tension, a separation, between meaning and the artist’s capabilities to express it. The ability of the artists, their capacity to play music in the correct way, or to find the correct word, is how they are able to bridge the gap. In lines 49 and 50 there is a reference to that moment where the separation between “meaning” and the “artist” dissipates. Lines 46, 47 and 48 contain a very nuanced metaphor, echoing other parts of the poem. The “blackness” from which one is able to draw out “music” has an obvious connection to memory. In previous lines, music was “memory” and now this idea continues. Furthermore, if the analogy with “memory” persists the reference to redemption continues. Redemption occurs not only because of “music”, or “memories”, are brought to light; redemption is produced because it was waiting to be drawn to light. The separate sphere, which can be easily be related with “time” and “memory”, where “music” and “meaning” remain, is not static, it is alive, in movement and changing. There is another ambiguity in this stanza; a connection brought the use of the word “tormenting”.

The conversation described seems a confession and its conclusion reinforces this idea. When someone confesses suffering, he/she could be suffering from a memory that he/she

needs to redeem. The person in need of a confession is in agony, in torment. The poetical subject “You”, who explains the relationship with music, seems to be in a similar state, facing the impossibility of recovering or achieving the kind of connection with music is a, torment, but, at the same time, the poetical narrator of the story is in a similar situation. Their story is tormenting this subject, memories, and the meaning behind memories needs to be drawn out from darkness, it needs to be graced from time and expressed. Moreover, the statement made in the poem is even stronger: both poetical subjects, as subjects of memories, are in need of redemption, which is achieved by making them characters in the story the poem is telling; but memories themselves, as the “music that waits in darkness”, are the ones that are tormenting and need to be redeemed.

Finally, the stanza adds to this concept the idea of “hunger” and “pleasure”, both again grounding “memories” and the feelings of the poetical subjects in the “body”. The line: “how (pleasure) it was to be opened/ and tasted by a hall full of people” concludes the stanza and makes more material the feeling which the poem describes. “Pleasure” and “music” need to be opened like a fruit. However, they also need to be shared. The connection built in the poem between the story being told, and what the poem is doing is obvious. The “hall”, where people “taste” are also the readers who are tasting poetry. The redemption of poetry and music is not only for the poetical subjects it needs to be shared. In these lines, through the story, the poem is building up a relationship with the readers and, indirectly, saying to them what it is trying to do. In the next section, the causes for the hunger the poetical subjects suffer, and how they overcome it, are enunciated.

55     When we reached home  
56     you were crying

57     Within a month you stopped playing.  
58     You stopped sleeping.  
59     Eighteen years old, exhausted,  
60     holding to the idea of perfect sound.

61     End of summer, rainy morning,  
62     your head in my hands.  
63     Across the room a jar of flowers  
64     made its small fire.

65      Curtains held their breath against the wet screens.

The first stanza (lines 55 and 56) remains isolated to make clear the importance of this conclusion, and to charge the sensation of failure and the desperation of both poetical subjects. The short lines of the second stanza (57 to 60), dominated by dots and comas, are less fluent than other parts of the poem, where sentences broken in many lines communicate pieces of information instead of scenes (like in lines 40 to 44), and the word “exhausted”, in between two commas, dominates the stanza. In the third stanza (lines 61 to 65), the lines continue to be very short, and the language is very concrete. The descriptions are minimal and relay in few information to construct a scene: “End of summer, rainy morning, /your head in my hands”. Seems like the world of the poetical subjects became smaller. Could be useful to compare these lines with a previous description (lines 22 to 24): “Piano flickered the leaves, evening in perfect summer, temperature the same inside and outside my body, night pigment in my skin.” Both lines construct a scene from very short lines. However, the last line of this verse (65) is longer than the rest of the stanza. The length of this last line helps to conclude the stanza because breaks its rhythm. Another reason for its length is the necessity of keeping together all the elements of the line: “curtains”, “breath”, “wet screens”.

These three stanzas close the section and have two functions: to explain what causes the frustration of not being able to reach the perfect expression, and to conclude a moment of the narrative the poem is telling. This double function is achieved in the third stanza and especially in lines 61 to 65. The change of season accompanies the change in the emotional state of the poetical subjects. In the poem, the inner state of the poetical subjects and their surroundings adjust to each other. In this case, the scene has rain as a symbol of “sadness”, and how the bodies of the two poetical subjects are positioned: “your head in my hands”. Nevertheless, in these scenes of failure, beauty remains, even if hidden and is very subtle. Firstly, far away from the poetical subjects, there is a group of “flowers” that made a “fire”. The expression “curtains held their breath”, although it is a description of the stillness of the curtains, it also adds an extra element to the stanza. The scene is a pause, a stillness, a moment of failure to which activity will return. When someone holds his “breath” needs to start breathing again, thus, there is a tension that needs to be solved, a tension is similar to the one that the poetical subjects are going through. The “wet screens”, which are indirect reference to rain and to sadness, complete the scene.

66      Dunn Lake.

67     We skied there gracelessly through the woods.  
68     Desperate light pressured the black trees  
69     to hold their pose.  
70     The moon reached under the ice  
71     where the lake moved, obedient.

72     Night pressed its thumbs over our eyes.  
73     Too dark to take the way we came, we went by road.

74     You reached ahead of me,  
75     I saw your figure in the porch lights.

76     We ate watching the fire,  
77     logs collapsing under the weight of flame,  
78     flames collapsing with their own weight.

79     Almost no word spoken since our silence at the lake,  
80     you said you'd play again.

81     Over two years since your hands were yours.

82     You asked smiling,  
83     face torn with shadows from the fire:  
84     “haven't you given up the perfect word yet?”

Previously, it has been argued how the author used the separation of lines to reinforce the meaning of the different parts of the poem. In these stanzas, which together form the central moment of the poem, this technique extends to the separation of stanzas. The different short stanzas form a continuum, and they could appear side by side without that separation. However, with this method, the poem flows much more slowly and the attention of the reader is brought to each scene as an individual moment. Meanwhile, this division makes sense because of the first stanza (lines 66 to 71) and how, although odd, the lines are presented and fulfill a purpose.

Line 66 bring the reader again to a previous scenario of the poem, and breaks the



direction the poem was going. Thus, the line only says “Dunn Lake” and finishes with a dot. The next line continues the same process, and thus both lines refer to the beginning of the poem (lines 1 to 11). The next lines (68 to 71), built up the scene using the context where the poetical subjects are to build up a particular atmosphere. The reference to the “moon” moving under the ice could be a metaphor of the emotions of the characters, who are moving under the “ice” of their “silence”. In the next lines gradually bring the resolution of a conflict, and the readers’ attention has to go moment by moment, stopping in each evolution of the scene, a scene that is silent, where the bond between the poetical subjects reveals itself slowly, piece by piece.

One of the main concepts New Criticism applied to the analysis of poems was the objective correlative, developed by T. S. Eliot in the article “Hamlet and its problems” (1921). The idea behind the objective correlative is the following:

“The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Eliot, 1921, 58).

Eliot’s statement is probably exaggerated or, at least, seems very difficult to prove absolutely correct, but it is still useful to understand lines 66 to 84 of the poem. In previous stanzas, there were descriptions, which functioned in the same way but those descriptions were shorter, they had less dramatic charge and importance and, in most cases, they contained ambiguities, references to ideas of the poem, or were intertwined with other lines where the emotion or the idea of the poem was more clearly expressed. In this case, the description that occurs between lines 66 to 84 is different; its meaning is much more subtle, being expressed in a very different way, and the idea of “object correlative” can explain it more accurately.

The idea of “objective correlative” can be useful in this case for two main reasons. Firstly, because the emotions being projected are not directly mentioned, they are hidden inside the poem. Secondly, because the lines do not fail in projecting the meaning, the lines are not a description, or even an evocative description, they are able to concentrate an emotion connected with the rest of the poem and, more importantly, they are a step in the narration the poem is developing.

One of the qualities of these lines is their balance. All the stanzas are constructed following an equilibrium. The different scenes that appear are described quietly. Some evidence of this can be found in the structure of the lines: each scene is concentrated in a few lines, not more than three (after the introducing stanza which is the only exception), and each short stanza closes the scene that is portrayed. Secondly, all the scenes happen at night, there are no strong lights, and although there is always movement, “reaching the lake, going back home, eating near the fire”, these transitions in space and time are always smooth. Moreover, although there are two poetical subjects in the scene there is no dialogue or other kind of contact between them until lines 82 to 84. The language of the stanzas is simple; there is only one metaphor in these stanzas (line 68), “night pressed its thumbs”, and only one adjective applied to an object, which could be unexpected: “desperate light”.

More elements of the poem create balance and a steady flow of the stanzas: there is a repetition, in the first lines, of the verb “reach” and, after the second stanza, formed by two sentences, the remaining stanzas are all formed by only one “sentence”. In the fourth stanza, there is also a musicality in the sounds, and a repetition that connects them. The first inner rhyme happens with “we, watching, weight and with their own weight”. Lines 76 to 78 have an incredible rhythm and the inner rhymes and repetitions make them very fluent. The repetitions are “flames” and “weight”, and “collapsing”, creating a beautiful image of different things collapsing over each other, coming to a conclusion, an end. One of the predominant elements of this stanza is silence, all the narrative and the scenes portrayed happen in silence and with very few lights and, because the stanza ends with a dialogue, the stanza closes itself with a beautiful contrast and also a sensation of fulfillment: the silence of the poetical subjects is broken.

The dialogue between the poetical subjects is especially important because it illuminates the previous scenes. The poem constructs sensations and conveys meanings and, which is more important, generates a framework where that dialogue can happen, where the words spoken by the poetical subjects make sense. It is important to understand that the point of view of the poem is the point of view of memory. We are looking at memories constructed as scenes. The dialogue between the poetical subjects, although it illuminates the previous memories it is also a scene. The key element of the scene is in the line 84. With this line, the poem continues to build its inner structure.

Firstly, it reconnects the love story of the poetical subjects, the “silence” between them is broken and the objective they had, to find the right “words” or the right “music” is reestablished. By reconnecting the poetical subjects, the poem absorbs the negative moments

of the previous stanzas and the tension generated in their lives, because of their inability to find the right “language”. However, this part of the poem also plays with “time”. The reference to “Dunn Lake” reconnects with the first section of the poem: the poetical subjects waiting in “silence close to the lake”. The “silence” of the first section of the poem, which is the same “silence” that continues through their travel going back home is broken by the question of the second poetical subject: “haven’t you given up the perfect word yet?” This question is incredibly paradoxical, because the poem is writing “memories”: the process of writing the question is how the question is asked. The poem is already answering the question through the way the question is written.

The first poetical subject, who probably can be considered the writer of the poem, already found the answer to the question, and that answer is the poem itself. More importantly, if we remember one of the previous statements in the poem, “the way a word is the memory of its meaning”, the line contains even more layers. The poem, which is only words, is the memory of the meaning hold in the past but, at the same time, “blackness where music waits/tormenting until you draw it out, a redemption”, could be connected with these “memories”. The poetical subject is redeemed because the right words were found, the poem itself, and because the moment in itself, as a possible “tormenting” and unresolved “memory” is redeemed when it is written. The last lines of the poem are like flashes of light that clarify the rest of the scenes in it. The poem is redeeming memories, and rescuing the past, by finding the right words.

85     Fingers have a memory,  
86     to read the familiar braille of another’s skin.  
87     The body has a memory:  
88     the children we make  
89     places we’ve hurt ourselves,  
90     sieves of our skeletons in the fat soil.  
91     No words mean as much as a life.  
92     Only the body pronounces perfectly  
93     the name of another

In this last stanza, which closes the fourth section of the poem, there is a transition from the story the poem is telling to the moral of the story, a parallel conceptual story the poem tells at the same time that it develops the story of the two poetical subjects. After

redeeming the past through words, the poem tries to bring back to its center the present and the body. The “past”, the “memory” needs to be redeemed by “words” but also by the “body”. The minds and the bodies are full of memories. Although the past can be redeemed by words, it is insufficient without redeeming what is behind the words, or the music, which is life and the body. The last two lines of the section express these ideas very eloquently: “Only the body pronounces perfectly the name of another”.

94     This morning your letter.  
95     A photo of redwoods in winter,  
96     the half-frozen pond.  
97     Remember the way we walked each other home-  
98     one block further, one block further-  
99     the way we skated in the ravine,  
100    later winter afternoon,  
101    so cold the air seemed to magnify the world,  
102    sky the colour of plums.

103   We sang in harmony on the ice, breath echoing white  
104   under the bridge, our fifteen-year-old bodies  
105   perfect and young under the winter clothes,  
106   warm from skating and singing,  
107   trees along the ridge a clack lace picket fence  
108   against a plume of orange like a comet’s tail  
109   where the sun had been.

110   Remember climbing the hill, already dark, and stopping to hear  
111   trees shake their branches,  
112   how we’d enter your parent’s warm house  
113   in a daze of images.  
114   Remember once, mauve and yellow tulips on the dining room table,  
115   remember the music when we said  
116   play those colours  
117   and turned Bach's “Anna Magdalena” the colour of yellow,

118 the colour of mauve.

119 Remember that October, standing in your farm's back field,

120 half a mile apart, while daylight collapsed

121 under the weight of darkness, and trees

122 thick with burning leaves

123 shouldered the stars.

124 Music emerged from those moments, from air,

125 like a room's white dimension in the window at nightfall.

These stanzas show one of the biggest contrasts in this poem. Previously, the poem was dominated by stanzas of few and shorter lines, where the sentences were normally written in only one or two lines (for example between lines 66 to 84). In contrast, in this last part of the poem the stanzas become bigger, the lines longer and the "sentences" more developed and full of comas and line breaks. The poem, as a whole, represents a conflict, and when this conflict appears, lines become smaller, more concrete, the scenes reduced to few objects scattered throughout the poem. The poem becomes more fractured and the images remain, to a point, isolated between them. However, when the main tension of the poem starts to dissipate, when memory and expression come together in the form of "words" or "music", the poem also matures. The scenes and feelings that the poem develops expand, and if one reads the poem aloud, the breaths, marked by the comas become longer and the pauses become less important.

The poem expands after line 97 when a series of memories occur, marked by the word "Remember". The quality of these lines is connected because of the theme of memory treated in the poem. Memory, at the beginning of the poem, is searching, finds scenes, moments, images, actions, and even if they relate between each other they do not develop together in a unity of form and content. In contrast, in any of the scenes preceded by a "Remember", in the previous stanzas, there is a memory that is alive and grows organically, connecting the poetical subjects between them and with their context, represented by nature. Precisely because the poem tries to express a memory that becomes alive and redeems the past in its different details, the lines and the stanzas also have to expand.

If the previous stanzas tried to express the difficulty of making memories come together by an artistic expression, through music or literature, these ones show how the unity of the form allows content to appear. If other parts of the poem are a search for meaning and

a way to express it, as well as the tragedy of not being able to do it, in the line 94 to 125 represent the moment when meaning reappears and memory becomes alive. Moreover, the unity of the memories described reappears and, with it, the unity of life. Lines 110 to 113 are one of the shortest examples of how the poem achieves this unity. In these few lines there is an action that connects the poetical subjects with their environment “climbing the hill”, nature providing meaning and beauty that is received by the poetical subjects, or “stopping to hear trees shake their branches”, an overall sensation of a connection and companionship between the two characters. These long lines, like long breaths, end with a philosophical statement that support these arguments in line 124: “Music emerged from those moments, from air”.

These stanzas, between lines 94 to 125, also insist on projecting images as its main tool for expressing meaning. The arguments presented previously about how these images work can also be applied in this case. However, there are important differences in this section that need to be taken into account. Firstly, there is a change in the point of view of the narrator, to whom the poetical subject is talking and in which time he/she is located. The narrator talks from a past much closer to the present, from the present itself. In previous lines, the narrator was remembering memories, and telling a story, maybe to herself or maybe to herself and the other poetical subject who appears in the story; now she is addressing directly the second poetical subject of the story. The memories are now told directly to him: “Remember the way...” Moreover, the second poetical subject is instructed in being part of the process that the poem is undertaking.

The point of view of the narrator is not anymore the same as someone who is reconstructing a story that her memories form, he/she is talking after having told the story. All the scenes that she describes are the different scenarios of the poem: “the countryside at winter, the home, the yard close to home at summer”. The poem goes back to the story that was being told but now from a different point of view, it is written resembling more a dialogue or a letter. Curiously, this section of the poem, between lines 94 to 125, opens up with one of the poetical subjects receiving a letter, lines 94 to 96. The poem contains the same technique that appeared in previous stanzas: a construction of a series of powerful images that capture memories in the form of complete scenes. It is very clear who are the poetical subjects of the scene, what they are doing, and what is the element in the scene powerful enough to make the scene a memory. The poem continuously shows what is doing, communicating the effect that it is trying to produce. The indirect meaning of the images that the poem projects is directly expressed by a reflection situated at the end of the stanza. The

poem has, to a point, two levels: how the memories are brought back to life through the artistic form, and what reflections appear because of this action. In this case, these reflective lines are: “Music emerged from those moments, from air, like a room’s white dimension in the window at nightfall”. However, before analyzing the content of these lines, it is necessary to point at some of the poetical characteristics of previous stanzas (between lines 94 to 125).

In all the images, which appear in these stanzas, the poetical subjects are either not alone, or giving company to each other in silence. All the memories are memories without solitude. Furthermore, the memories seem to be from moments before both poetical subjects had a breakdown because of their inability of creating meaning by art. After telling the story of their goal, how they cannot achieve it, and how they recover from that failure, the poem goes back again to the past, and affirms itself in being able to create meaning, and rescuing the meaning, which remained in those moments. This last section of the poem might be understood as an affirmative end after the moments of tension in sections three and four.

Finally, the last image the poem brings from the past is a perfect atmospheric scene. The main elements are the “sky”, the “sunset” and the “trees”. The reference to a sunset for a closing connects the traditional motives related to sunsets with the position of the lines in the poem. Between lines 94 to 125, the poem reunites the different motives of the stanzas to each other and bridges the different parts of the poem using key ideas, “as painting the colour of music or recreating the music of a scene with words”. Some of the key ideas of the poem are contained in the closing lines of the stanza: “Music emerged from those moments, from air, like a room’s white dimension in the window at nightfall”. Music is language, meaning, (the poem talks about music because the other poetical subject is a pianist). The central verb “emerged” is very important because it stresses the importance of the previous stanzas, between lines 94 to 125, but it is not through words of music that meaning can be created, and disconnecting the meaning from the memories, meaning has to arise from the memories. The poem says in a previous line that “no words mean as much as a life”, the real meaning cannot be created by words or music, and thus it must be rescued from life itself: “you described the blackness where music waits, tormenting until you draw it out, a redemption”. The reference to “air” is very ambiguous, its meaning pointing in very different directions. Firstly, “air” can be considered a substance, which exists between things, one that connects them and allows them to be seen. “Air” is also a clear atmospheric reference, pointing to the context, to the whole experience pictured throughout the poem. In addition, “air” is not a solid thing, it is not a differentiated object that you can point at, it is in between objects, and because of this, it is a good symbol of the general effect that a scene can bring to mind. The

second part of the utterance, points precisely to this transition of the mood or tone of a particular moment. The slight change that suffers a room when there is a transition in the light outside, how, in the sunset, the ambience of a room changes smoothly.

126 Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,  
127 existing as the historical moment-alone,  
128 and existing in history-linear,  
129 in music, in the sentence.  
130 Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,  
131 the way the earth remembers our bodies  
132 the way a man and woman in their joining  
133 remember each other before they were separate.

134 It's over twenty five years and every love poem  
135 says how your music and my word are the same:  
136 praising the common air, the motive, the memory.

These stanzas are an example of the philosophical tone the poem has in some of its parts. They continue the relationship between “memory” and “form” and, as in the other cases, they make explicit some of the movements occurring within the poem in previous lines. The connection between “form” and “memory” works in two ways: “memories”, because how they function, have necessarily a “form”, since they connect different elements of the past and connect them in a scene. At the same time, when the poem gives “form” to things it creates something similar to a memory. To construct something from life, from the past, it is also to remember, it is a moment of memory. The form of these stanzas is adapted to their main function: they present an argument about what is trying to be said. The use of dashes is important, because it marks the abstract or conceptual quality that “moment” and “history” have. From lines 126 to 129, the poem states what assumptions about form it is built upon, and develops some philosophical points about what is the relation between form, memory and artistic expression. Form that, in the case of literature, is concentered in the sentence is what gives unity to memory, but also to life, is what joins the present, as a succession of “moments”, and the life of the poetical subjects and their past, that conforms a “linear unity”. The previous stanzas where the poem insisted in remembering are a poetical concretion of these principles.



The next line (130) reflects exactly what has been happening in the poem. Firstly, it built strong images, contained in themselves, like spheres. Each of these images is able to bring to the reader a complete scene of a memory. For example: “Remember that October, standing in your farm’s back field,/half a mile apart, while daylight collapsed/under the weight of darkness, and trees/ thick with burning leaves/shouldered the stars”; or, at the beginning of the poem: “The first time I knew what we were trying for/I was waiting on the back porch while you practiced./Piano flickered the leaves, evening in perfect summer,/temperature the same inside and outside my body”. At the same time, these memories form part of a story; they are connected and flow together.

Because of the intensity of the images, and since each image is connected with others, and forms part of the same story, the poem as a whole remembers the story of the poetical subjects perfectly. Because the poem tries to express the meaning of the life of the poetical subjects, and is not only a simple connection of words, the poem is able to remember perfectly. The intensity of the memories is also the intensity of how the memories affected the people who lived them. Moreover, the poem is also a recollection, the poem digs on memory and gives form to the past, being a way of approaching the past and a way to redeem it. Because of the work done in figuring out what passes through the sieve and what not, only the elemental, the parts of the past that remain, are contained in the poem. “The way earth remembers our bodies”; earth did not only produce the bodies, the bodies are made of earth and live on the earth. Finally, there is a reference to a common theme in erotic poetry or love poetry, which has a platonic tradition: “the way a man and woman in their joining / remember each other before they were separate”. The bodies of men and women form a whole, before them meeting, and before they knew about each other. In this case, because of the continuous references to the body, the memories the lovers can have is because of their bodily connection. It is also a way of expressing the power of some encounters, when the lovers meet, because of the intensity of their connection, they have the sensation they met before, or that they have known each other before. The intensity of love is projected into the past and generates a false sensation of memory.

Just before the last part of the poem the second poetical subject appears again and, what is most important, the common path both poetical subjects followed. These lines restate the importance of artistic creation, the main theme of the poem, but they also make explicit a relevant formal aspect the poem praises, the poem talks about the “common air, the motive, the memory”.

137 To praise memory is to praise the body,  
  
138 And I find myself describing  
139 the joining of hips and eyes,  
140 the harbors of thighs and lips,  
  
141 as the singing of two small bodies in a dark ravine  
142 as two small bodies  
143 holding up the night sky in a winter field.

Finally, the poem achieves a last connection. It must be taking into account that this poem builds in a way that its unity, the relations that exist between its different parts, is fundamental. The recurrence of themes and motives, and the reflective parts, where what the poem is trying to achieve appears explicitly, is precisely a way of sustaining its unity, the construction of a narrative that connects the different memories also helps to maintain its unity. The three elements connected in these stanzas are also (the body, memory and language) the sustaining elements of the imaginary of the poem.

As a conclusion to this analysis, it is interesting to stress the central idea of this poem: the redemption of the past by artistic means. In the beginning of the analysis, it was said that this poem was, to a point, a response to “Memoriam”. The central theme of “Memoriam” seems to be nihilism and the incapacity of communicating something valuable between generations. On the contrary, this poem continually insists on the importance of communication and, more importantly, in the importance of expressing the past, “memories” through artistic creation.

## Conclusion

This dissertation tried to prove some points about the early poetry of Anne Michaels, and about the usefulness of close reading as a methodology. As stated in the methodological section the usefulness of close reading cannot be proved a priori, after reading the two main analytical sections of the poem the reader should be able to judge if it has some interest or not. One of the other aims of this thesis was to defend a position about the relationship of form and content in poetry. This idea, summed up, is that form is not an embellishment of content but that form, understood as the structure of a poem, should be, in certain cases, the focus of the literary critic. This does not mean that other kinds of analysis, such as gender studies, biography, analysis of the literary system where a book or an author is situated, or the application of philosophical or psychological tools like deconstruction or psychoanalysis are not useful. On the contrary, the position defended on this thesis is that precisely through a close reading grounded in the text the insights of those methodologies, their products will be much more interesting.

Because of the aim of this thesis, and the length available, the close readings were especially focused on formal and conceptual elements. However, there is a concept and a relation that appeared repeatedly throughout the analysis of the two poems. The concept was memory and the relation was the connection between the poetic form and memory. The continuous appearance of this concept and this relation, as well as the essential role they have in both poems prove the existence of the connection of form and memory in Michaels' early poetry, especially in her first book *The Weight of Oranges* (1986).

The last point that this thesis tried to prove is that this understanding of memory, relates with the author's idea of what is to write and what are the reasons someone can have to write. This last point is not clearly proved in the dissertation, since two close readings are not enough to do that but, to a point, it was proved that, for the author, the connection between artistic expression and memory are relevant. The significance of this connection appeared very clearly in the last poem "Words for the Body".

It seems important to bring forward a few questions, maybe research questions this thesis will help to answer in the future: what is the relationship between memory and writing for Anne Michaels, and how is that relationship developed throughout her works? What

continuities and differences appeared in her work through time? What poetical techniques that she used in these poems will she have used in her novels? What themes continue and what themes dissipate in her evolution? The first question is probably the one that is closer to the interest of this thesis, at least in its second part. That memory is deeply connected to the assumptions that the poem has about form and poetry, after this analysis, should be clear in the case of her early works.

After the effort done in this thesis, the next research that other academics will conduct on Anne Michaels will have two advantages. Firstly, it will have some firm ground to start speaking about her early poetry, and therefore, to be more independent from the influence of the novels, and secondly, it will have an analysis which will serve as a comparison to other findings that academics will do, and also it will serve as a tool to contrast different views. Finally, and on a personal level, hopefully this thesis may also contribute to show the quality of the author in “Memorial” and “Words for the Body” and, through it, to encourage the reader to know more about Anne Michaels’ poetry and the beauty that can be found in it.

## Appendix 1: “Memoriam”

In lawnchairs under stars. On the dock  
at midnight, anchored by winter clothes,  
we lean back to read the sky. Your face white  
in the womb light, the lake’s electric skin.

Driving home from Lewiston, full and blue, the moon  
over one shoulder of highway. There,  
or in your kitchen at midnight, sitting anywhere  
in the seeping dark, we bury them again and  
again under the same luminous thumbprint.

The dead leave us starving with mouths full of love.

Their stones are salt and mark where we look back.  
Your mother’s hand at the end of an empty sleeve,  
scratching at your palm, drawing blood.  
Your aunt in a Jewish graveyard in Poland,  
her face a permanent fist of pain.  
Your first friend, Saul, who died faster than  
you could say forgive me.  
When I was nine and crying from a dream  
you said words that hid my fear.  
Above us the family slept on,  
mouths open, hands scrolled.  
Twenty years later your tears burn the back of my throat.  
Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist.

Earth crumbles from your fist under the sky's black sieve.  
We are orphaned, one by one.

On the beach at Superior, you found me  
where I'd been for hours, cut by the lake's sharp rim.  
You stopped a dozen feet from me.  
What passed in that quiet said:  
I have nothing to give you.

At dusk, birch forest is a shore of bones.  
I've pulled stones from the earth's black pockets,  
felt the weight of their weariness – worn,  
exhausted from their sleep in the earth.  
I've written on my skin with their black sweat.

The lake's slight movement is stilled by fading light.  
Soon the stars' tiny mouths, the moon's blue mouth.

I have nothing to give you, nothing to carry,  
some words to make me less afraid, to say  
you gave me this.  
Memory insists with its sea voice,  
muttering from its bone cave.  
Memory wraps us  
like the shell wraps the sea.  
Nothing to carry,  
some stones to fill our pockets,  
to give weight to what we have.

## Appendix 2: “Words for the Body”

We knew we’d reached Dunn Lake  
because the trees stopped.

Chilled and sweating under winter clothes  
we stood in the damp degenerated afternoon.  
We grew up waiting together by water,  
frozen or free,  
in summer under the cool shaggy umbra of firs,  
or in the aquarium light of birches.

It’s always been this way between us.  
We reach lakes then just stand there.  
Silence fills us with silence.

When we were fourteen  
you read to me about Landowska, who  
“tottered the world and stopped the sun when she held a note.”  
We argued over interpretation  
until we were sixteen and discovered Casals:  
“the best musician learns to play what’s not on the page.”  
We decided music is memory  
the way a word is the memory of its meaning.

The first time I knew what we were trying for  
I was waiting on the back porch while you practiced.  
Piano flickered the leaves, evening in perfect summer,  
temperature the same inside and outside my body,  
night pigment in my skin.

In that swathing twilight  
I knew you'd had a lover.  
Everything became part of that new perception.  
The yard disappeared.  
Sudden as my sense of your body,  
I knew you were attempting silence.  
To move an audience  
until the aren't listening.

We believed in our head perfect version,  
but you couldn't make your hands, and  
I couldn't make my words, pronounce it.

Even now when I hear you play  
I think of a lover, gasping at the gate  
of another, who suddenly knows  
love has no power to make it right.

The summer you stopped playing  
we were driving home from the farm,  
windows full of stars on the dark highway,  
legs bare on vinyl seats, night air  
cold and new as from the sea.

In a voice that came from the highway  
you described the blackness where music waits,  
tormenting until you draw it out ,  
a redemption.  
Then the fear of forgetting notes  
disappears, the fingers have a memory of their own.  
You spoke of a kind of hunger  
that makes pleasure perfect.  
Then you said how it was to be opened



and tasted by a hall full of people.

When we reached home  
you were crying

Within a month you stopped playing.

You stopped sleeping.

Eighteen years old, exhausted,  
holding to the idea of perfect sound.

End of summer, rainy morning,  
your head in my hands.

Across the room a jar of flowers  
made its small fire.

Curtains held their breath against the wet screens.

Dunn Lake.

We skied there gracelessly through the woods.

Desperate light pressured the black trees  
to hold their pose.

The moon reached under the ice  
where the lake move, obedient.

Night pressed its thumbs over our eyes.

Too dark to take the way we came, we went by road.

You reached ahead of me,

I saw your figure in the porch lights.

We ate watching the fire,

logs collapsing under the weight of flame,  
flames collapsing with their own weight.

Almost no word spoken since our silence at the lake,  
you said you'd play again.

Over two years since your hands were yours.

You asked smiling,  
face torn with shadows from the fire:  
“haven’t you given up the perfect word yet?”

Fingers have a memory,  
to read the familiar braille of another’s skin.  
The body has a memory:  
the children we make  
places we’ve hurt ourselves,  
sieves of our skeletons in the fat soil.  
No words mean as much as a life.  
Only the body pronounces perfectly  
the name of another

This morning your letter.  
A photo of redwoods in winter,  
the half-frozen pond.  
Remember the way we walked each other home-  
one block further, one block further-  
the way we skated in the ravine,  
later winter afternoon,  
so cold the air seemed to magnify the world,  
sky the colour of plums.

We sang in harmony on the ice, breath echoing white  
under the bridge, our fifteen-year-old bodies  
perfect and young under the winter clothes,  
warm from skating and singing,  
trees along the ridge a clack lace picket fence  
against a plume of orange like a comet’s tail  
where the sun had been.

Remember climbing the hill, already dark, and stopping to hear  
trees shake their branches,  
how we'd enter your parent's warm house  
in a daze of images.  
Remember once, mauve and yellow tulips on the dining room table,  
remember the music when we said  
Play those colours  
and turned Bach's "Anna Magdalena" the colour of yellow,  
the colour of mauve.

Remember that October, standing in your farm's back field,  
half a mile apart, while daylight collapsed  
under the weight of darkness, and trees  
thick with burning leaves  
shouldered the stars.  
Music emerged from those moments, from air,  
like a room's white dimension in the window at nightfall.

Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,  
existing as the historical moment-alone,  
and existing in history-linear,  
in music, in the sentence.

Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,  
the way the earth remembers our bodies  
the way a man and women in their joining  
remember each other before they were separate.

It's over twenty five years and every love poem  
says how your music and my word are the same:  
praising the common air, the motive, the memory.  
To praise memory is to praise the body,

And I find myself describing  
the joining of hips and eyes,  
the harbors of thighs and lips,

as the singing of two small bodies in a dark ravine  
as two small bodies  
holding up the night sky in a winter field.

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